

How Do Children Feel Toward Younger Brothers and Sisters?

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How do children feel toward their younger brothers and sisters? What makes them feel as they do?

Seeking answers to these questions, the Department of Child Development and Family Relationships at the New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University studied 23 children, most of them six and seven years old. The Department's findings, which are reported in this bulletin, may help you see your own children more clearly. They may also help you to better understand and interpret your children's attitudes toward each other.

These 23 children were chosen for the study reported here because their mothers had previously been studied to find out who were the strict and who were the lenient or "permissive" mothers in the community. Researchers were then able to compare the children's attitudes toward their younger brothers and sisters with their mothers' feelings toward them.

The study reported in this bulletin investigated two important kinds of feelings. One of the feelings was called *control*. To a child, "being older" usually means that he is bigger and stronger and that he *can* make the younger child do as he wishes. *Does* the older child usually decide what the younger child will do? If so, we say the older child has "high control." If he seldom decides for the younger one or seldom insists on his decision, he has "low control." If he and the younger child decide together or take turns in deciding, then the older child has "moderate control" of the younger one.

The other feeling was called *acceptance*. If the older child *likes* the younger one—likes to see him happy and to make him happy—we say he has "high acceptance" of him. If the older child dislikes the younger child—likes to see him unhappy and enjoys hurting and annoying him—he has "low acceptance" of him. If the older child pays little attention to the younger one, doing little either to help or hinder him, to make him happy or unhappy, or if the older child both shares and helps and refuses and interferes, then he has "moderate acceptance" of the younger child.

Many studies have shown that children express their real feelings about other persons when they play with pictures or dolls and doll playthings. They put

themselves in the place of the children they see in the pictures or act out their own feelings in the doll-play stories. The "games" planned for this purpose stimulate responses from the child through which he projects his own feelings into the persons in the games. Through such games children reveal their deep feelings which they cannot express or talk about directly.

Two kinds of "games" were used in this study: a series of pictures and a series of stories to be played out with dolls and doll playthings. The pictures were simple black-and-white line drawings. They were shown to the child in pairs with an explanation that they were about children like him and his brother or sister. The child chose the one he liked and told why he liked it. In each picture the older child and the younger child were doing something which could be thought of as friendly or as unfriendly.

The pairs of pictures gave the child the choice of having the older child:

Share a toy train with the younger one—or snatch it from him

Share the swing, the slide, the wagon, the pet (a kitten), food (apples)—or monopolize these things for himself

Play happily with the younger one—or fight him

Help the younger one in trouble (when he couldn't get his wagon up over an obstacle)—or ignore his predicament

Help the younger one who was crying—or run away from him in his distress

Include the younger one in fun with one of his parents (reading stories with Mother and playing with Daddy)—or exclude him and monopolize the affectionate interest of the parent

With each doll play the child listened to a brief story about an older and a younger child, with comments, "Just like you" and "Like your sister Mary," or "Like your brother Bob." In an exciting part of the story, the storyteller stopped and asked the child, "And then what happened?" The children played out the rest of the stories in any way they wished. They tended to express in their words and actions the feelings they had for their own brothers and sisters.

In their dramatic play, as the children finished the stories, they had the opportunity to:

Share—or withhold from the younger child: food (apples or pears); pet (dog); playthings (garden tools: rake and hoe; or sand toys: pail and shovel)

Share with the younger child—or keep him out of activities that he too would enjoy, such as:

watering the flowers for Grandmother

sweeping the porch for Mother, and

presenting the gift to Father which the two children had made together
(In all these activities the older child shared—or deprived the younger child of—the affectionate appreciation of the adult)

Share responsibilities—or blame the younger child for what happened:
when they took the baby for a ride and the baby buggy tipped over
when they played with a ball and it bounced away in the tall grass
when they rode in the wagon which hit a rock in their way

Help the younger child—or leave him in distress:
when the younger one could not reach the toys he wanted from the high
cupboard
when the younger one was left behind in running and couldn't catch up

The person who made the study had visited in the children's homes and the children looked forward to "playing games" with her. The "game lady" made three visits to each child, each time playing several of these games with him. In each picture or story there was an older and a younger child. Because the child being tested had a younger brother or sister, he usually put himself in the place of the older child. The "game lady" scored him for each game—once for the degree of control and once for the degree of acceptance he indicated toward the younger child.

Some of the things the children said have been selected to describe for you the meaning of high control, moderate control, and low control; and of high acceptance, moderate acceptance, and low acceptance. As you read what the children said, remember what the pictures and the stories were about.

THE FEELING OF CONTROL

High Control

"He won't give the little fellow one (apple). . . 'cause he wants them all."

Albert

"He's eatin' pears. . . Big boy will give the little one some." *Bob*

"Pushin' him away; he'll get hurt." *Charles*

"The boy's hittin' the little girl to keep her in the house . . . he'll hit her again." *Dan*

"The biggest boy is tellin' the little boy to pet the kitty." *Ed*

"He'll take the wagon away from the little one; then he'll pull it." *Frank*

All six children leave little or no choice to the younger children. In each case the older one decides what the younger one will do.

Albert and Bob know what will please the little children, but they make different decisions. Albert keeps his little brother from getting what he wants, and Bob gives his brother what will make him happy.

Charles and Dan both use their physical strength to control the younger children, but Charles protects his little brother, whereas Dan hurts his little sister.

Ed and Frank are using things they could share with the little children. Ed tells his little brother to come pet the kitty, but Frank takes away his little brother's wagon to pull it by himself.

All six children use *high control* over their younger brothers and sisters. But they don't all feel the same way toward them. Bob, Charles, and Ed like their younger brothers and sisters and warmly accept them. Albert, Dan, and Frank dislike their little brothers and sisters and are low in accepting them as persons like themselves. With strong control, some boys and girls look out for their younger brothers and sisters and some look out only for themselves.

Moderate Control

"She's readin' 'em a story and they're both listenin'." *Ann*

"They're both playin' with the kitten and havin' fun." *Beth*

"They're playin' on Father together." *Carrie*

"Two boys playin' with a train." *Dick*

"They're havin' fun pushin' each other in the wagon." *Earl*

"The little girl's goin' up the slide and the big one's standin' by the steps ready to go up." *Fannie*

"She's lettin' the little boy go up (the slide) ahead of her. She'll take her turn afterward." *Gwen*

"Pushin' the wagon. . . gets to ride when the little one gets through." *Hal*

"He's givin' the little brother some stuff. . . some pears." *Jeff*

"The big one is holdin' the kitty and lettin' the little one pet him." *Katie*

"Pullin' the wagon. . . helpin' him." *Linda*

"Tryin' to make the little girl stop crying." *Mamie*

These older children do pretty much what they want to do and so do their younger brothers and sisters. Ann, Beth, Carrie, and Dick are doing things with their younger brothers and sisters. Earl, Fannie, Gwen, and Hal are taking turns with the younger ones. Jeff, Katie, Linda, and Mamie are being helpful to their younger brothers and sisters in different ways. Linda helps pull the wagon that gets stuck. Jeff gives his little brother some pears. Katie holds the kitten still for petting. Mamie comforts her little sister when she is in trouble.

Whether playing together, taking turns, or giving some kind of help, all twelve children are getting what they want or need, and so are their younger brothers and sisters. The older ones are looking out for themselves and also for the younger children. They have middle or moderate control.

Low Control

"The big boy asked the little girl if he could have an apple and she said 'yes'." *Andy*

"The big girl is crying and the little girl is tryin' to get her to come home so she can get fixed up." *Barbara*

"Playin' with it (the wagon). . . (but) the little one always gets in the way." *Cassie*

"He wanted to go up the board and slide down too. . . (but) the little one made him stay down." *David*

"She asked for a ride. . . (but) the little boy said she couldn't have a ride. She got mad and went home." *Eva*

"Tryin' to get some apples too. . . (but) the little boy's got 'em and won't let her have 'em." *Fred*

"Tryin' to get it (Grandma's sprinkling can). . . (but) the little boy gets there first to get it." *George*

"The big boy doesn't let him have either of them (the rake or the hoe). . . (but) the little boy pulled it out of his arm." *Herbert*

"Grabbin' it (the train). . . reachin' for it. . . fight. . . the little one gets it." *Jennie*

"Girl standin' and says 'Get away from there so Father can love me'. . . (but) the boy kicks her and she cries." *Kathie*

"Cryin'. . . the little boy punched her in the face and he's walkin' away." *Lena*

These older children are doing what their younger brothers and sisters let them do. Whether the little one feels kindly and helpful, or mean and interfering, it is his choice that decides what the older child may do.

Andy and Barbara get what they want and need only because their younger brother and sister want them to. Cassie gets less. David, Eva, and Fred are denied their wishes by the younger children. George, Herbert, Jennie, Kathie, and Lena try hard to get what they want, but each yields to the younger child.

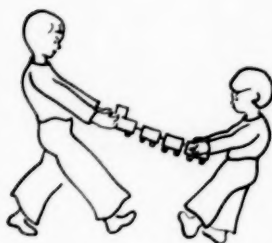
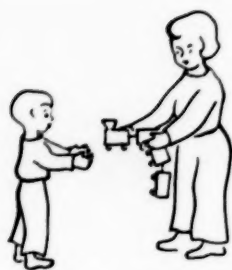
All eleven of these children have *low control* over their younger brothers and sisters. They yield to their wishes with or without a struggle. No matter what the older children think of their younger brothers and sisters, they have such weak control that they cannot deal with the younger ones as they may want to.

THE FEELING OF ACCEPTANCE

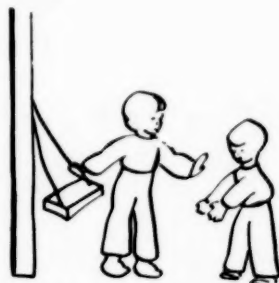
The children's sayings on the last few pages show the meaning of high, moderate, and low control over younger brothers and sisters. The sayings on the next few pages show the meaning of high acceptance, moderate acceptance, and low acceptance of younger brothers and sisters.

The older children look upon their younger brothers and sisters as friends,

THESE ARE SOME OF THE PICTURES



Sharing a toy train—or snatching it.



Swinging the younger child—or pushing him away.



Playing happily—or fighting.



Helping get the wagon over the bump—or paying no attention.

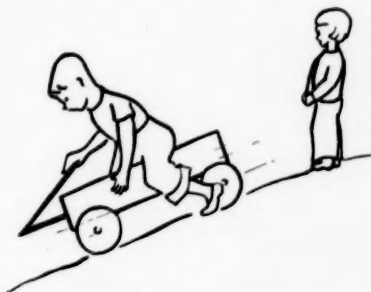
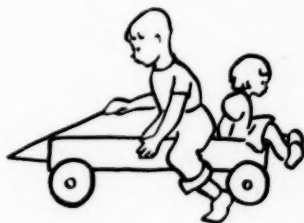
THE PICTURES USED IN THE STUDY



Including the younger child in his story with Mother—or excluding him.



Letting the younger child have a turn at the slide—or pushing him away.



Sharing his fun with the wagon—or leaving the younger child out.



Sharing Daddy—or leaving the younger child out of the fun.

companions, and playmates; or as "being around," sometimes "to play with" and sometimes "in the way"; or as competitors and enemies.

Remember the pictures and the stories as you read what the children said.

High Acceptance

"The boy leans down and the little girl gets an apple. She reaches for it but she's too little." *Amos*

"Lots of dishes came out (cupboard fell over) and he slanted it up again. Put the pans down where the little girl can reach them this time." *Ben*

"Boy's holdin' the cat 'cause the little girl might get scratched." *Chuckie*

"The boy's pullin' the cart up after the little girl went down. . . so she can go down again." *Donald*

"They pull it (the wagon). . . they got it halfway up now." *Edith*

"Sharin' the wagon and lettin' each other pull the wagon. . . from the grocery store." *Florence*

"Father's goin' to give the little boy a ride first, then the big boy. Give both a ride once." *Gifford*

"He's pushin' the little girl. They're takin' turns. . . She'll probably have more fun that way." *Harry*

"They're sharin' the swing and pushin' each other." *John*

"They're both playin' with the kitten and havin' fun and smilin' at each other." *Ken*

"The father is huggin' the big girl and the little girl." *Laura*

"They're both sittin' in the chair and the mother's readin' to them. . . their mother's got her hand around both of 'em." *Michael*

These boys and girls care about their little brothers and sisters. They know what will please them. They do things for them and plan to make them happy.

Amos, Ben, Chuckie, Donald, and Edith realize that the little folk aren't as big or strong or skillful as they are. Amos and Ben get things that are out of reach for their little sisters. Chuckie holds the cat so his little sister can pet it without getting scratched. Donald drags the cart uphill for his sister, and Edith helps by pulling along with her.

Florence, Gifford, and Harry share materials and take turns with their younger brothers and sisters. Florence lets her sister pull the wagon with her from the store. Gifford lets his little brother have the first ride with Daddy. Harry pushes his little sister before he swings himself.

John, Ken, Laura, and Michael are sharing with the little folk pretty much on an equal basis—John the swing, Ken the pet cat, Laura Father's hug, and Michael Mother's story reading and affectionate embrace.

All twelve children highly *accept* their younger brothers and sisters. Although they vary from rather *high control* to *moderate control*, they are always thoughtful for the younger children's happiness.

Moderate Acceptance

"They play; she goes and plays with her dolls and he plays with the train all by himself." *Alice*

"The boy gets there first. He takes the sprinkling can. She goes out and walks beside him." *Bill*

"He watered the plants. She brings the pail in." *Chris*

"The boy gives the surprise to Daddy. Little girl says, 'We bought it for you, Daddy!'" *Don*

"Ride in it (the wagon), the boy and the little girl. Boy steers." *Evert*

"Then after she gets done swingin' she'll let the little boy swing." *Flo*

"Little one stays down till the big one gets down." *Gus*

"The big boy will give him *one*." *Henry*

"Said he couldn't have any. Little boy cried, and got one." *Jack*

"Father's got the little girl on his back and the boy in his arms. Boy tells the little girl to get off Father's back." *Karl*

These children are happy near their younger brothers and sisters as long as the little folk do not bother them. They tend to be busy in their own activities and to do little either to help or to hinder the little ones. When the interests of the older and younger children conflict, the older ones share or yield a little, or they ignore or bother or tease the younger ones a little. Their feelings for the younger children are not so much for or against them as fairly neutral; as long as they themselves are happy, they are glad to have the younger ones happy too.

Alice plays happily with her dolls with no concern for what her younger brother is doing. Bill, Chris, and Don let their younger sisters accompany them, even letting them take some minor role in their activities. They monopolize the sprinkling can and water the flowers, but they let their little sisters walk beside them and Chris lets his sister bring the pail in afterward. Evert lets his little sister ride in the wagon with him but he does all the steering. Don gives the joint birthday gift to Daddy, but he lets his little sister tell Father about it.

Flo and Gus are willing to let the little brothers use equipment when they don't want to use it. Henry and Jack are willing to share a little. Henry gives one pear on request, but Jack does so only after his little brother cries. Karl shares Father's affectionate play for a while but then, even though he is in Father's arms, he tells his little sister to get off Father's back.

These ten children have moderate acceptance of their younger brothers and sisters. They do not go out of their way to help or to hinder them in getting what they want or in doing as they like. They alternately refuse and comply with the requests of the younger children. They seem to consider them either as adding to or interfering with their own activities, and deal with them accordingly. They like them well enough to include them and even welcome them in certain roles. They dislike them only as persons who interfere and who are irritating in some role.

Even in dealing with their interference, they exercise neither very strong nor very weak control. Karl does speak to his little sister and tell her to get off Father's neck but only after letting her share a while. Henry gives his little brother one apple; Alice, however, practically ignores her little brother playing nearby.

Low Acceptance

"Tells his mother and Mother spans the little boy and puts him to bed and the big boy plays with the cat all the time." *Alec*

"Standin' and tellin' Daddy stuff. Daddy's spanking the girl 'cause she's naughty, naughty, naughty girl and the boy is a good boy, good boy, good boy." *Barrie*

"Hittin' the little girl. . . tryin' to keep her in the house. . . Hit her again." *Celia*

"Socked the little boy and the little boy's cryin' and the big boy's walkin' away fast, sayin' 'Me tough'." *Duncan*

"Eatin' apples. . . Little girl's askin' for an apple. . . He says she can't have no apple." *Eben*

"Tryin' to climb up (the slide) and pushin' the little boy away." *Freda*

"Gets it (the train) and the little boy can't do nothin'." *Gladys*

"Takes the rake and shovel to the house and puts 'em away where she can't get 'em. She can't reach 'em." *Homer*

These children look upon their younger brothers and sisters as opponents. They deliberately keep them from doing what they want to do, and they do whatever they can to make them unhappy.

Alec and Barrie get their little brother and sister into trouble with their parents so they get spanked and sent to bed. Celia and Duncan do the hurting themselves, "hittin' and sockin'."

Eben and Freda won't share materials. Eben won't give his little sister any of his apples and Freda pushes her little brother away from the slide.

Gladys and Homer take things away from the smaller children, the things

they are playing with. And Homer even puts the things where his little sister can't reach them.

These eight children all feel unfriendly toward their younger brothers and sisters, taking pleasure in preventing them from doing as they wish, in making them unhappy, and in hurting them and getting them into trouble. Their actions involve *low acceptance* of their brothers and sisters.

Most of them try, at least, to *control* the younger children to their own advantage and to the unhappiness of the younger ones.

HOW THE CHILDREN FELT

Each of the 23 children in the study played 2 games, one with pictures and one with dolls. Each child was scored twice, once for his control and once for his acceptance. The 23 scores for one attitude were listed in order. The children whose scores were in the upper half of the list were called "higher" in that attitude; the children whose scores were in the lower half were called "lower." Most of the children responded the same way to the pictures as they did to the doll play.

The questions we tried to answer by grouping the children and rating them on the two attitudes were:

How accepting were the children who used higher control?

How accepting were the children who used lower control?

How controlling were the children who gave higher acceptance?

How controlling were the children who gave lower acceptance?

In answering these questions, we used only the children whose scores with pictures and doll play were similar.

The answers to the first pair of questions tell us whether there was a difference in acceptance between the "higher control" and the "lower control" children. Definitely there was. Three-fourths of the children combined higher control with lower acceptance or lower control with higher acceptance.

The answers to the second pair of questions tell us whether there was a difference in control between the children with "higher acceptance" and those with "lower acceptance." Again, three-fourths of the children combined higher acceptance with lower control or lower acceptance with higher control.

WHY THESE CHILDREN FELT AS THEY DID

How did these children get the feelings they expressed toward their younger brothers and sisters?

We chose these children for study because their mothers had previously been studied and had been rated high or low in control and acceptance. Were the

children who expressed lower control the children with the permissive mothers? When the children became strong enough to get younger children to do as they wished, were they more strict or more permissive, as their mothers had been with them? When they found they could make the younger children happy or unhappy, were they more accepting or less accepting, as their mothers had been with them?

Four-fifths of the children had the same control rating (higher or lower) as their mothers. About two-thirds of the children had the same acceptance rating (higher or lower) as their mothers.

We noted earlier that the children who used higher control were likely to give lower acceptance to their younger brothers and sisters, and those who used lower control were more likely to give higher acceptance. We next asked, "Are these patterns of control and acceptance of children like the patterns of their mothers?" Over three-fourths of the children showed patterns of control and acceptance similar to their mothers' patterns. Apparently the mothers' attitudes of control and acceptance influenced their children's attitudes toward their younger brothers and sisters.

DID THE MOTHERS KNOW HOW THE CHILDREN FELT?

We tried to see how well each mother could predict how her child would respond to the games he played with the "game lady." While her child was busy at the games, each mother told the assistant which picture she thought her child would choose and why, or what she thought he would do or say in playing out each doll story. Her answers were rated on the same scale as the child's responses, once for control and once for acceptance. The two sets of responses were compared. The mothers whose predictions agreed best with their children's responses were called "better predictors"; those who had fewer agreements were called "poorer predictors."

Did the mothers predict any better on one attitude than on the other?

The "better predictors" were somewhat better in predicting their children's control than in predicting their acceptance of the younger children.

The "poorer predictors" were about equally poor in predicting about the two attitudes. Mothers can see control behavior but they have to interpret the feeling of acceptance.

Did the better predictors, for the most part, differ in their attitudes of control and acceptance from the poorer predictors? Definitely there was a difference. Most of the "better predictors" used lower control and gave higher acceptance and most of the "poorer predictors" used higher control and gave lower acceptance.

What may explain the attitude pattern of the better predicting mothers? Why may the higher accepting mothers need to exert less control or less frequent control? We cannot say from this study whether a mother is a good predictor because she accepts her child, or whether she accepts her child because she can understand how he feels and thinks, or whether she uses lower control because she can foresee how he will act and so can keep one step ahead of him. We can, however, see definitely that one group of mothers predicted better than the other, and that they used lower control and gave higher acceptance.

Apparently mothers who highly accept their children, no matter how they may act, can put themselves in the place of their children. They can see situations through their children's eyes and so they can predict the children's feelings and actions. This ability enables them to be helpful to their children. Because these mothers know how the children think and feel and are likely to act, they can help them achieve their goals in acceptable ways. The children discover that their mothers' help really does help and that their mothers are *for* them and are helping them toward happiness and achievement. As this happens, the children tend more and more to trust their mothers and their mothers' help. They expect to find satisfactions in doing as their mothers direct or suggest. Therefore the mothers need to use less control. When mothers like their children, whatever they may do, and let the children know that they like them, the children can take and use their help. They expect to find that it pays off in their own happiness. Therefore lower control brings their cooperation.

HOW CAN THIS STUDY HELP YOU WITH YOUR CHILDREN?

The reports of these children may help you see your children more clearly and recognize when they are high, moderate, and low in control, and high, moderate, and low in acceptance in their interactions with each other. Then you may be able to recognize these attitudes in yourself and in your own children.

The study shows, moreover, that these children tended to express toward younger brothers and sisters the patterns of attitudes that they had experienced in their interactions with their mothers. In this study the two patterns that were outstanding were (1) higher control and lower acceptance and (2) lower control and higher acceptance. Mothers with the latter pattern—lower control and higher acceptance—were more likely to be "good predictors" who could anticipate their children's feelings in a given situation and could therefore foresee and take care of their needs and wishes ahead of time. They could avoid trouble by foresight or by planning ahead and therefore seldom needed to exercise strict control.

This study indicates that mothers expressed to their children the two attitudes as a pattern, and that apparently the children interpreted the two attitudes together and expressed them together in dealing with younger children. The study shows that the ways the mothers felt toward their children got across to the children in everything that happened between parents and children. The way the mothers felt about the children made their control of them mean help and happiness—or interference and neglect. Evidently mothers who highly accept their children can see through their children's eyes and can understand why things happen and can appreciate how hard the children are trying. They can plan for their success. They can offer help that the children can accept and use. Therefore lower control wins cooperation from their children.

On the other hand, mothers who do not know how their children feel and think do not understand what their children are trying to do, and so they cannot help them achieve their purposes. When these mothers enter into the children's affairs the children think they are interfering and opposing them rather than helping them. It therefore takes stronger control to get these children to do as their mothers want them to do.

The study further implies that it pays mothers to find out what to expect of children at different ages and stages. Such knowledge may help them learn how their own children feel and think—children always have their reasons—and help them understand their children's actions. They can discover what their children are trying to do. Many of the children's goals, when they are discovered, are in line with their adults' goals for them. When adults discover this, they can cooperate with the children—instead of controlling them—and the children can then cooperate more fully with the adults.



Cooperative Extension Service, New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University and the U. S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. In furtherance of Acts of Congress May 8, June 30, 1914. M. C. Bond, Director of Extension, Ithaca, New York.